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Russia and the EU: The Global Cooperation Agenda

Alexander Titov

Two factors are important for effective cooperation with Russia in the wider world. First, the EU needs to develop a downgraded, 'values-light' agenda focused on solving concrete challenges. Second, to achieve the first point, a common minimum set of shared principles needs to be agreed upon. The need for such change is underscored by structural barriers for constructing an international community based on general solidarity of interests and values held central to the EU.

There is a growing awareness of the limits to the EU's solidarist or normative approach to international relations, particularly evident in the Middle East, East Asia and even Europe, as exemplified in the Ukraine crisis.¹ The opposition to the EU's normative approach is usually expressed in the concept of a multipolar world or pluralist international society, favoured by Russia among others.² At the same time, there are challenges in security and other areas that demand a shared response from international actors who do not necessarily agree on all normative principles.

In dealing with Russia on global issues the EU should, therefore, develop a reduced agenda of short to medium-term aims, which are achievable without insistence on Moscow subscribing to the entire normative framework expected from the countries within the EU. To facilitate this turn, an attempt should be made to find a common denominator in their approach to international affairs. These minimum principles, acceptable to both Russia and the EU, can be defined as the basic package of the Westphalian system: sovereignty, territoriality, diplomacy, and great power management of global issues.³

The following chapter examines what those common principles between Russia and the EU could consist of, and explores how this modified approach can facilitate cooperation between Russia and the EU on several issues on the global agenda. Specifically, the focus will be on Syria, Turkey, the Middle East, and China, as well as non-regionally specific topics such as international trade, terrorism, and migration.

SYRIA

The case of Syria is perhaps the most important current example of differences and potential for cooperation between Russia and the EU. There has been a fundamental difference in Russia and Europe's perceptions of the causes of the Syrian drama.

The EU saw the uprising against Assad as a legitimate expression of popular discontent. Moscow's view was more aware of the complex nature of Syria, with its ethnic and religious diversity sitting uncomfortably alongside a close-knit ruling group in charge of a strong army and security apparatus. Combined with intricate regional rivalries between the Gulf states, Turkey and Iran, the swift demise of the Syrian regime was seen as unlikely and – given the likely rise of extreme Islamic groups in its place – undesirable.

The Syrian case has allowed the Kremlin to pursue a policy that exemplified its core principles in international affairs: the priority of stability over revolutionary change, and state sovereign rights over humanitarian intervention.⁴ At the centre of Moscow's criticism was the West's interventionist agenda of democratisation that has made the situation in the Middle East worse – from Iraq to Libya and Syria. President Putin⁵ has consistently argued that the known devil of secular authoritarian states is the only effective structure to keep religious fundamentalism at bay.

A compromise over Syria has been hindered by these fundamental disagreements about the causes of the conflict. The immediate removal of Assad has until recently been a non-negotiable condition for the West,

while Moscow sees the current regime as the only force able to defeat IS. However, in the aftermath of the Paris attacks by the IS, some EU members, notably France, are moving closer to Moscow's position of side-lining the issue of Assad's fate for as long as it is necessary in order to defeat IS.

This might provide the beginning of a broader realignment of EU-Russia relations. The key would be to focus on practical solutions to a shared security concern, in this case destroying IS. In order to achieve this, there will have to be a division between primary goals (defeat of the IS), medium goals (the end to the Syrian civil war), and long-term goals (the establishment of democracy in Syria). To achieve the first two goals, a compromise with Russia is inevitable. This will require re-assessment of the EU's order of priorities in foreign policy, specifically the role of its normative goals. This may create a precedent on formulating a new model for dealing with Russia.

TURKEY

Relations between Russia and Turkey, the EU's two largest neighbours, have been forced on to the international agenda after the shooting down of a Russian warplane by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015. Mediating the fallout might require considerable effort because the incident was not a tragic misunderstanding, but a logical development from the two countries' differences over Syria.

Turkey, with its 2 million refugees, remains the key to the EU's attempts to manage the refugee crisis. At the same time, Turkey's main objective, preventing the establishment of a Kurdish state, as well as support for some controversial rebel groups in Syria pose serious dilemmas for the EU. Worryingly, the shooting down of the Russian warplane can be seen as a Turkish attempt to impose a no-fly zone in Syria along its border, at the very time when Western opinion has been shifting towards Russia's position on Syria.

At the heart of the current standoff with Turkey is Moscow's belief that secular authoritarian rulers are the only effective bulwark against radical Islam in the Middle East. The Kremlin genuinely feels the threat of radical Islam to its domestic security and international order. This puts it at odds with Ankara's position of promoting religious revival in the Muslim world under its stewardship.

In both Russia and Turkey, the EU faces similar dilemmas over the principles guiding its foreign policy.⁶ President Erdogan's politics are underpinned by Islamic revival, his aspirations as a leader of the Islamic world are evident, for example, in his open support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria. The openly stated desire to restore Turkey's leading role in the region and the world has clear parallels with the Russian behaviour in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space.

The EU's approach to foreign policy is based on expanding its community of values.⁷ Russia, on the other hand, protects the Westphalian system based on state sovereignty, non-intervention, diplomacy and great power balance. As a result, the EU's normative expansion has been securitised by Russia, seeing it and its derivatives such as human rights, democracy, and civil society, as a direct threat to the established system of sovereign statehood. Turkey is closer to Russia on these issues even if it is not so open about it.

Russo-Turkish relations are likely to occupy the EU's foreign policy because of the impact they will have on the current refugee crisis and the conduct of the Syrian civil war. In addition, energy politics, the issue of EU enlargement and the Ukraine crisis, particularly with regards to the issue of Crimean Tatars, who are historically close to Turkey, are also likely to be affected. The EU's role should be that of a mediator between Russia and Turkey, as stabilising those relations is a key component in enhancing security and stability in the EU's immediate neighbourhood.

THE MIDDLE EAST

The fundamental danger in the Middle East is the collapse of the state as the dominant actor in international and social order. Relatively robust in the Middle East until 2003, the state as the core actor is being overtaken by non-state elements such as IS or violent anarchy, as has occurred in Libya.⁸

Both Russia and the EU have shared interests in preserving the basic building blocks of international system in the Middle East: state sovereignty, territoriality, and recourse to diplomacy as the prime means of solving disputes. For this to work, the EU needs to accept Russia's emphasis on limits to intervention on normative grounds, and engage itself in great power management as a pre-condition for addressing the

challenges in the Middle East, including effective action against international terrorism.

In this context, Iran's nuclear deal can serve as an example of successful cooperation between EU members and Russia on a shared security problem. It was achieved by focusing on clear objectives and accepting diplomacy as the main medium for reaching a compromise. As a consequence of Western sanctions being lifted, Iran is emerging as a potential replacement or counter-balance to Russia as a principal gas supplier to Europe. However, in dealing with Iran the EU would have to cooperate economically with a regime that does not share its core values to an even greater degree than Russia.

Egypt is another example of a problematic transformation in the Middle East. The Al Sisi regime is friendly with Russia for exactly the same reason that it has strained relations with the EU: the normative break in understanding political legitimacy between the EU and Russia. For the former, popular expression is all important; for the latter stability and preservation of secular state structures are paramount. However, the dangers to the very basis of the modern international order across the Middle East should help the EU and Russia agree on a minimal agenda of restoring sovereignty, and related principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states as the lynchpin of the international law. This would have significant implications for solving the Ukraine crisis.

CHINA

One of the most important long-term factors arising from Russia's current estrangement from the EU is the impact it has on Russia's relations with China.⁹ This has repercussions for the general balance of power in the world and might significantly affect the EU's economic and political security.

Differences in Russia's approach to China and the EU are best summarised by the absence of a normative dimension in Beijing's foreign policy. As a consequence, this has enabled Russia to build closer relations with China than the EU, even though the Kremlin is well aware of the strategic challenges presented to Russia by the rise of China.

There are several reasons for Russia's nuanced approach to China's presence in the former Soviet space. First, it can be argued that this is a case of Russia joining a project it cannot resist. Acceptance by Russia that China is stronger economically means it is seen as crucial to build relations with China, amicably manage its rise, and derive benefits from a special relation with it.

Second, in contrast to the EU, Russia and China have no ideological basis between for intrusion into each other's internal affairs. Consequently, there is no need to fend off demands for improving democracy and allegations of human rights abuses that have often been the stumbling block in EU-Russian relations. On the contrary, China is willing to acknowledge Russia as an equal – at least verbally – and eschews the moralising tone typical of the EU's approach.

Not being able to exclude both China and the West from the former Soviet space, the Kremlin seems to prefer China because it is more comfortable with it ideologically, it offers an appearance of equality, and is willing to delegate to Russia pre-eminence in political and security spheres. This will allow Russia to consolidate its hold on Eurasia at the expense of the US and the EU. This poses a significant challenge to the EU's ambition of creating a stable neighbourhood and may require further re-assessment of its relations with Russia in a wider context of world politics, perhaps by moderating its normative thrust in areas of practical concern.

SANCTIONS AND GLOBALISATION

The near universal acceptance of free market globalisation has been the key Western achievement of the modern era.¹⁰ The EU should safeguard and promote this achievement, which is being undermined by politically motivated economic sanctions that inevitably create a negative link between globalisation and national security.

The politicisation of the only universally accepted element of globalisation – free trade and economic liberalisation – leads to further securitisation of international trade and finance by Russia, already seen in a range of economic legislation. However, there is a wider problem of entrenching the idea of inherent potential danger in dependence on Western markets and finances by non-Western countries in general.

The EU should re-consider whether its security and prosperity is better advanced by entrenchment of Western institutions as the main standard around the world, or if economic sanctions can be used as an effective tool in foreign policy, which necessarily would undermine universal acceptance of Western-led globalisation. The issue of mutual dependence, and whether it enhances or endangers security, has not disappeared from the EU-Russia agenda.

There is a clear need for a more predictable system in international trade, particularly as there is a danger of the re-emergence of trading blocs as the principal forms of economic organisation of the world economy.¹¹ Within this context, continuing tension between the EU and Russia may prompt the latter to strengthen its ties with China to a much greater degree than Moscow would have found comfortable otherwise. The key is to agree on some basic principles which would safeguard Western-led globalisation, while removing incentives for non-Western countries to create rival systems to protect themselves against any future Western threats.

CONCLUSIONS

The current juncture in foreign affairs poses many dilemmas for the EU and its member states. In the two crises dominating its foreign policy agenda, Ukraine and Syria, the EU is constrained to find a new model for dealing with the rapidly changing world. Russia presents opportunities for revamping the EU's foreign policy on a more sustainable basis for two, seemingly contradictory, reasons.

Russia's failure to fully democratise since 1991 means that it has a normative chasm in relations with the EU. This includes resistance to basic principles the EU is aspiring to embed in international relations: equality, human rights, democratic principles, and liberal rights of individuals. A challenge for the EU is to deal with a country which openly questions its fundamental values. This is particularly difficult because the extension of these values to the rest of the world has been regarded by the EU as a guarantee of global security and prosperity.¹²

Yet there is an opportunity too. Despite the gap in understanding the underlying principles of international organization, Russia is historically and culturally closer to the EU than most countries in the EU's neighbourhood. It retains and promotes the classical approach to international affairs, broadly based on realism or pluralism, whose elements are necessary for a more sustainable and pragmatic foreign policy.¹³ The EU could benefit from rediscovering the core basics of international system by focusing on managing tensions between states through agreeing on common rules and principles, rather than by imposing its core values onto the rest.

A re-establishing of an agreement on some basic rules and institutions of international system, which will be acceptable to all international actors, could be an important step in building a secure international environment for the EU and the world. Finding a *modus vivendi* with Russia could, therefore, serve as a workable model for the rest of the world.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The EU needs to develop a downgraded, 'values-light' agenda for dealing with Russia on global issues. The focus should be on solving concrete challenges over the short to medium term, for example in Syria, which are achievable regardless of Russia's acceptance of the normative framework expected from the EU or those aspiring to join it.
2. A common minimum set of shared principles in international relations needs to be agreed upon. These minimum principles at present can be defined as the basic package of the Westphalian system: sovereignty, territoriality, diplomacy and great power management of global issues.
3. The EU could benefit in practical terms by re-balancing its foreign policy towards agreeing a pluralist framework between states with different interests and values, rather than prioritising the spread of its core values on the others. This should allow the EU to maintain its soft-power advantage over the long term. ■

NOTES

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